

Danse Macabre by FreeWinona

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Summary: William Byers disappears into thin air in 1983. His distraught mother must set aside her differences with the only man who can help her now. In their desperate search for her son, they uncover the dark world of the occult, a terrible haunting and something the Witch's daughter calls the Other Side. Stranger things have happened...

1. The Vanishing of William Byers

Hawkins, Indiana

October 26, 1883

Sleep riddled James Hopper's head like a dense cloud, letting him forget where he was for the foggy moment between dreams. He reached across the bed for the warmth a woman who was not there. His hands grasped at thin air instead, and the cold, twisted sheets that wrapped around him like a tourniquet.

When he finally stumbled out of bed and shook the cobwebs off, he caught a glimpse of the clock and cursed. He was late for work again.

He hastily made his way to the medicine cabinet and took a swig off a dark glass bottle. The bitter tincture burned on the way down, but he didn't care. He looked forward to the sting every morning. And periodically throughout the day... And twice again before bed. Initially prescribed by a physician for a chronic case of melancholy and fever three years earlier, Hopper reasoned it was the only thing keeping him going at this point.

As he got dressed, he chased the tonic with a nip or three of whiskey and half a cigarette leftover from the night before. A touch of cologne was the finishing touch to mask the scent of his morning routine. He strapped his sidearm and fixed the crooked badge on his uniform before stepping out into the low autumn sun.

Fall had swept through the Midwest with a cold fury that year, turning the trees into an ocean of fiery yellows and reds as far as the eye could see. The clear cornflower-blue skies of summer had given way to brooding clouds. They hung over the town like a death shroud, a shadow veil hiding the sun, and bringing with it the acrid perfume of decay.

As the days grew shorter, so did Hopper's patience. Once a loving and devoted husband and father, he felt dead inside now. Utterly devoid of human emotion. His wife Diane and his darling little Sara were taken within days of each other by a nasty bout of consumption almost four years previous. It wiped out half of Manhattan's Eleventh

Ward before he realized New York had left him with nothing, and he retreated to the comforting arms of his hometown.

Looking up from rock bottom, sleepy little Hawkins seemed like the only choice left for him. It was somewhere he felt safe enough to collapse; to mend a shattered heart and ride out the rest of his years in relative ease. After all he fought for during the war and carried with him still, the tragedy of losing his girls was too much to bear. It left him feeling empty.

More than empty; like a dark star, ready to collapse in on itself.

He found as the years passed by, and despite his best efforts, the broken pieces of his heart would not fit back together, no matter how hard he tried to make it work. He was watching himself turn into a lonely and embittered man in the mirror. He was slowly becoming his father and couldn't think of a worse fate.

Just like his father, he only had a small circle of people who he could trust. His closest friends were former soldiers in the war, now his deputy officers, Callahan and Powell. He could barely admit it to himself, but he spent most of his time with those two fools either at work or at the tavern after work. His friends had their own young families to focus on though, so after he sent them home for the day, Hopper would spend the latter half of his evenings closing down the bar and chasing after the available women in town, breaking their hearts before they could barely get attached.

He was alone in this world and was starting to think that nothing would ever change. It was his lot in life. Eventually, he accepted his fate and stopped caring. He became lazy. Mid-morning arrivals to work had become the norm, but no one seemed to notice or care.

No one, except Florence.

The police department's secretary was all but tapping her foot at his late arrival, waiting for him when he arrived. She took his coat from his arms and the still burning cigarette from his mouth disapprovingly. He nodded to the boys in the bullpen as he made his grand, yet fashionably late entrance.

Callahan piped up, "You look miserable, Chief."

"Funny, your wife hardly looked any better when I left this morning," Hopper didn't skip a beat, smiling snidely to the young officer as he walked by his desk. Powell hid his chuckle behind his cup of coffee and watched Callahan struggle to find a suitable response for his superior.

"Thank you very much for gracing us with your presence, James," Florence interrupted, handing him his day's work and a cup of steaming black coffee as he passed by her desk. A schoolmarm in her younger days, she played the part well enough around the office, making sure all of Hawkins finest were running on time. Her only problem child now... was the chief.

Her hands found her hips when he didn't acknowledge her, "You have a visitor this morning."

Hopper grumbled into his cup, "Already? It's only... half past ten. Did I not make myself clear before? No appointments before noon; my mornings are for coffee... and contemplation."

Yes, that sounded about right.

"I didn't have a choice in the matter," Florence explained with a huff, handing him the paperwork she had already started and following him through the bullpen to his office in the back of the building. "The young lady insisted she speak with you immediately and pushed right through to your office. She won't budge until she sees you, and only you — stubborn thing. Of course, I've been keeping her calm while you took your time getting here this morning," the older woman's voice dripped with sarcasm. Hopper would have told her that particular tone didn't suit a woman of her age... if only he were a braver man.

"Please tell me the pushy little lady that's waiting for me is beautiful, or at the very least, eligible," he grunted as he stuffed the paperwork in his uniform pocket, not able to muster enough care to look it over. He was confident the matter was a stolen purse or a civil disagreement, something that didn't require his personal attention — that's what he had the two buffoons sitting in the bullpen for.

"It's Joyce Byers, Chief. She says her son is missing."

That stopped him in his tracks. It felt like a lifetime since he had heard that name, and it sounded so foreign to him now as his secretary said it. A pang of nostalgia caught his attention, which quickly turned to hurt, remembering how much heartache that confounded woman had caused him in a previous life. He felt a burning agitation growing in his chest at the parting memory he had of her... or perhaps that was the laudanum finally kicking in.

"Did you ask the Widow Byers if she remembers where she left him?"

"That's not appropriate James," Florence tutted at him, giving him a stern look over her spectacles. "She's rather upset."

Hopper took a deep breath before opening the door to his office, preparing himself for a maddening interaction. His guard dropped slightly when he saw her sitting there, looking lost and forlorn. A small nagging thought played at him, a reminder that she had played this game with him before, and he was the one who lost; she could always play the victim so well.

As the door closed behind him and he stepped into the room, he got a better look at her under the dim light from the window. Her hair was a matted, frizzy mess tucked under the net of her fascinator, a futile attempt to look put together. Her hollow eyes stood out against the sharp pallor of her skin, betraying her weak constitution. She was so far removed from the young, vibrant woman he once knew. It was if a stranger was standing across the room from him now.

"Police Chief Hopper," she curtsied as he walked around her to his desk, much to his chagrin. Her tone was polite, but he could hear an underlying hint of irritation as she spoke. No doubt for having to wait over an hour to see him. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

"We can drop the formalities, Joyce. You know damn well you didn't give me a choice in the matter. Safe to say we're beyond pleasantries now," he was stern, not wanting to play games with her, just wanting to get this over with and move on with his day. Yet, despite everything that had gone on between them in their formative years

— and the resentment he felt thinking about it again — seeing her looking like this was pulling at a small part of him he thought was long buried.

"Oh, well. My apologies... Hop," her head dipped at her slight and his correction, but she made a point of saying his name as only she knew it.

Joyce looked like an awkward little bird with a broken wing that needed mending. As he sat down behind his desk, she followed suit, and he observed her nervously plucking at her wrinkled skirts while she waited for him to get settled. It looked to him like she had been wearing the same dress for days and Hopper supposed that was very likely the case if her son was indeed missing. If he knew anything about Joyce, it was that she loved her sons more than life itself. He also knew her to be flighty and forgetful too, so it was hard to say if Will was truly missing or she had just lost track of his whereabouts in this state she was in. Regardless, he could tell that whatever had happened was clearly impeding her mental faculties — she was a vibrating, nervous wreck. Gazing at her pitiful form, he supposed he could give her the benefit of the doubt, one last time.

"All right then, why don't you tell me what happened. From the start," Hopper set out a pen and ink, and some paper to take notes as Joyce spoke.

She took a trembling breath, looking down at a small cabinet card with her son's image on it, and held it tight in her hand as if in prayer. Steadying herself, she began, "My son, William - Will was out visiting friends two days ago after school. He never made it back home."

"Did he tell you when he would be back?"

She nodded, elaborating, "He said that morning he would be home for dinner. It's not like him, but he's getting older now. When he didn't make it back, I just assumed he stayed with friends. I called on all of them yesterday, and all they could tell me was they had been at the river that afternoon, and he had left an hour before I expected him home." Her words were clipped. She was trying her best not to cry.

He wrote down her answers languidly as he continued the inquisition, "And you've searched the property for him? Your house is at the edge of Mirkwood, isn't it?"

"Yes. My oldest and I have torn the forest apart. It's as if Will disappeared into thin air..." she wrung her hands in worry and bit her bottom lip hard as if willing herself not to think such things.

Hopper paused for a long moment to light a cigarette and offer another to Joyce, who took it as if she had been starving for one. Watching as she brought it to her lips with a shaky hand, he bided his time before he spoke again, wanting to choose his words with particular delicacy.

"Have you considered that he might have run away? Boys of his age will do that, you know. Do you still have relatives in Illinois? Is it possible he went to visit them?"

"No," she couldn't help but raise her voice at the underlying suggestion that she was a bad mother and couldn't keep track of her boy. "I know my son; he wouldn't do something like that without telling me. It's been almost two full days! Even if he did, he would have contacted me by now," she cast her eyes to the floor, the uncertainty starting to creep in. "I'm sure of it."

"I stole away when I was a teenager to go fight in the war, Joyce. I didn't tell anyone until I had to," Hopper spoke gently, confident she didn't need the reminder of the abrupt end to the trysts of their youth.

"The war is over if you recall, and... and he's not like you!" Joyce snapped at him and her face twisted, vexed at his words. He could tell she was holding her tongue to keep from insulting him.

She took a deep breath before she continued. Hopper was her only hope now, and he could tell she was desperate for his help.

"And he's not like me. He's not like most. He's a sensitive soul, creative... and smart... the other children tease him and call him awful names." She went back to wringing her hands, getting lost in her thoughts, "Something is wrong, I just know it."

Her eyes locked onto his from across the desk, imploring. Hopper sighed. There was no getting out of this, was there?

"Well, the first thing we should do is organize a search party and get his image in front of as many people as we can. You have that picture card of him?"

She looked down to the card in her hands, tracing the grey image of Will with her fingertips; likely the only memento she had of her beloved son. Hopper only wished he had the same of his sweet Sara.

"Take that to the printers on the way home and have them draft up some posters with his vital information." Hopper wrote down what she would need to give to the pressman and passed it to her. "I will organize the rest, but I have to be honest with you Joyce... Your reputation around town won't help us much."

Joyce's set her jaw at his words and heaved a drawn-out sigh as if she had been expecting him to say it.

"I can certainly pay your department for the time if that is what it's going to take to get this process started." She stuck the cigarette in her mouth in a very un-lady-like fashion to open her coin purse with both hands, as if expecting his outstretched palm, but Hopper waved her off.

"That won't be necessary. You're entitled to public services as much as anyone. I'm just uncertain how many volunteers we can muster up for someone who's known as the Widowed Witch of Mirkwood..." his voice trailed off, regretting the words, as he watched her face cloud over.

Joyce frowned at the ridiculous name the townsfolk had given her. She knew it all too well.

Her husband had died a mysterious and sudden death the year previous. Joyce never spoke of it to anyone, but they all knew. His body wasn't even in the ground before she took advantage of the life insurance policy in his name at the factory. It seemed that dying had been the one and only good thing Lonnie Byers ever did for his family. And despite being given every opportunity to mourn, Joyce

had refused her social obligation. How could she possibly be expected to grieve for the drunken brute of a man she had married? Someone who beat her and her sons if they stepped out of line. Someone who treated her like a dog when they were out in public and didn't even bother to hide his frequent visits to the bawdy house. From the outside looking in, Hopper could understand why she couldn't bring herself to mourn that monster of a man, but the community couldn't ignore her disregard for societal norms, and she was quickly shunned.

Joyce only fanned the flames. Instead of indulging the proper grieving period, she splurged on a new wardrobe. She wore jewel-toned velvets and pastel chantilly lace loudly around town, just to make sure her true feelings toward her dead husband were well known. It didn't take long for the townsfolk to start talking after that.

Did you hear? Joyce Byers murdered her husband. She only did it for the money.

Hawkins ran wild with whispers and lies: She went crazy and poisoned him. She cut his body up and buried him in the woods behind their house. A secret lover helped her do it, and they danced naked under the full moon... on his grave!

Soon, rumor had it she had summoned a demon to do her bidding. She was labeled an outcast. A scarlet letter. A particular kind of witch.

Of course, Hopper didn't believe any of the rumors... but he did think that maybe she had it coming. After all, it was Lonnie's arms she ran to when Hopper didn't court her fast enough for her liking in the summer of 1863. It wasn't soon after she broke his heart, Hopper left her and Hawkins behind to fight for the Union, severing any remaining threads that kept them bound together.

"Those rumors are completely unfounded," she started, trying her best to contain the rage bubbling up inside of her. "And they have nothing to do with my Will."

"I know they are, Joyce," Hopper rubbed his tired eyes. "You're right, it has nothing to do with Will. I'm just saying this might be a bit of an uphill battle for us if we want any information on the whereabouts of

your son."

Her face clouded over at the realization sunk in. Even though he was six feet under, Lonnie Byers' was still causing her trouble in this life. That son of a bitch.

"I was awfully sorry to hear about your husband," Hopper cleared his throat, though his voice betrayed him; Joyce picked up on his lack of sincerity immediately.

"Please, spare me your condolences," she held her hand up to him to stop right there and save them both the discomfort of going through the motions. "We both know what type of man my husband was. My sons and I are much better off now..." she trailed off, a look of distress adorning her delicate, worn features. "Or rather, we were, until my poor b-" she choked on a sob, clutching the picture to her chest. Hopper passed her his handkerchief and gave her a quiet moment to lament her missing child.

He was all too familiar with the pain she was going through, and as she wept, he resolved to put the past aside. He felt compelled to help this broken little bird, despite himself and their history. At least there was still hope for her that Will would return home safely. He'd be damned if he let her lose the fleeting chance to bring him back; something he never had.

When she composed herself again and looked back at him, it was with glassy, pleading eyes, "I need you to find him, Hop."

"We will find him," Hopper hoped she would see the truth in his eyes, even if he didn't feel it himself. "I promise."

There was nothing more he could do right then but comfort her with a pledge that he prayed he could keep.

For the first time since he laid eyes on her that morning, a small smile graced Joyce's delicate features. "Thank you," she extinguished her forgotten cigarette out in the ashtray on his desk and stood up to shake his hand. The gesture felt strange coming from her.

He took her proffered hand with both of his and watched as her lips

parted with the shock of his touch. He waited for her to say something more, but she never did; the space between them heavy with everything that would remain unsaid. He couldn't shake the sudden feeling that they had done this all before. *Déjà vu*.

When the strange moment passed, he was the first to let go, and he guided her to the door, giving her brief instructions on her next steps.

"Take that picture to the printing press and then go home straight away. I'll take care of everything else. Get some rest. I will stop by as soon as I have more information for you."

She paused before leaving, her hand clutching his forearm. Her eyes searched his, one more time.

"You'll find him for me?"

He nodded, "I swear." That time it felt like the God's honest truth.

She nodded solemnly, holding the slip of paper and image of Will tight to her chest, taking his promise and her orders with her as he escorted her out of his office. She seemed to float down the dark hall towards the station's front door, and as he watched her exit, he wondered how he would manage this mess. Just when he thought he had enough of his own problems to deal with, she had to show up at his doorstep with a doozy.

How could he expect anything less from Joyce Byers?

As Joyce stepped out onto Main Street, the gravity of the situation finally hit her, along with the heavy door to the Police Department. It slammed shut behind her, clanging like a gong, waking her up to the sudden realization that this was all too real, and the dark, dreaded feeling, that nothing would ever be the same again. A horse tied to the hitching post outside the building whinnied, startling her once more, just as a young man walked by. He gawked at her until he rounded the corner, out of sight, as if he saw a ghost. It took all her strength not to break down right then and there. She couldn't, not yet. Her heart was heavy with the weight of the tasks laid out for her: Visit the printing press, then home to rest. Miles to go before she could sleep.

Joyce felt like she was drifting above herself, tethered to her body, as she glided down Main Street like a ghost. Another woman caught her eye, her face twisted into a disgusted sneer. She imagined she was a sight to be seen, practically un-dead; a shell of the woman she was the day before last. Her reputation was preceding, and her current appearance didn't help, but she didn't give a damn about any of that anymore. If they only knew...

She could feel the townsfolk eyes on her. She could even hear them whispering. Her cheeks burned red from resisting the urge to lash out at the next person to point at her or titter to their acquaintance. Joyce bit her tongue, knowing that she would need these people on her side if she wanted even the slightest chance to find her boy. She kept her eyes down and focused on her steps, one foot in front of the other.

"Printing press. Home. Sleep. Press. Home. Sleep."

It became her mantra as she made her way through the center of town. It was taking everything not to collapse on the street under the righteous scrutiny and the unbearable burden she carried. There was nothing else left to do but carry on.

When she got to the printers, the Pressman was waiting for her. She never thought she would say it in her lifetime, but thank goodness for James Hopper and his keen foresight to have the operator call ahead. Joyce was grateful for the small gesture saving her from having to relive the nightmare and explain herself again. It only took a quick moment to get the information organized for the poster and an estimate on when the prints would be ready. She left with the Pressman's kind word that the photo would be returned to her within the day in the same condition she gave it to him.

Once again, she found herself standing alone and feeling lost on Main Street in her hometown — a place she knew like the back of her hand. She was restless with the urge to do something, anything to help find Will. It felt wrong to head home to idly stand-by while others held her son's life in their hands, but Hop was right. What good would she be to the cause when she was such a mess? His word's ringing in her ears, she turned around and began the long walk home.

2. It's Happening Again

The rustle of leaves underfoot was her soundtrack on the long march home from the center of town. Joyce had finally started to become numb to it all and was trying her best to just enjoy the walk for what it was, without dwelling on the situation at hand. Off in the distance, the noon train to Indianapolis sounded its whistle while birdsong carried lightly on the breeze. A rooster crowed from a nearby cottage. Each sound was comforting to her; pure white noise and a blank canvas to paint her thoughts.

The sky had begun to clear up, and a blue sky threatened to break through. The maple corridor, which lined her path home, glowed a ruby red in the sun as the broad leaves danced around the hem of her skirts. It was turning into a crisp autumn day, beautiful in all its glory; a stark contrast to the bleakness she felt in her heart.

The familiarity of the scene made her yearn for the quiet and simple life she had only one week prior. All the mornings she spent walking her boys to school when they were younger played in her memory. Jonathan walking ahead with Will pattering behind, stopping every few yards to jump in another gully full of leaves. Joyce would have to pause and wait, chirping at him to hurry up (he'd be late for school, again!) even though she loved to see him so excited by the season's offerings.

Her sweet baby boy, eyes full of wonder and light. He was all she could see when she looked around her now. Everything reminded her of Will. There was the tree he loved to climb, and that was the pond where he caught his first frog when he was three. Over there was the bench they would stop and sit on when she walked him home from school. Happy memories came flooding back at once, and she smiled. But it didn't last long before her thoughts quickly turned dark again, as she vividly recalled the reality that she had been at this exact spot two days ago, crying out his name over and over into the forest, as Jonathan searched every nook and cranny of the woods.

It was then and there that she finally allowed herself the indulgence to cry.

At first, it was a whimper — small and hidden behind a delicate lace glove. A stifled sob followed, and Joyce tried to steady herself, suddenly unable to breathe; it was as if someone sucked all the air out of the sky above. She was gasping when the tears came. With each step closer to home, Joyce allowed the tears to wrack her body. She became unabashed and unwavering in her cries, shed of the worry that someone might witness her coming-undone.

She rounded the corner down the winding path to her home, and her only relief was the sight of the smoke drifting out of the chimney indicating that Jonathan was home from Indianapolis.

The old house had once been a neglected two-story gothic revival, but after Lonnie's insurance paid out, Joyce wasted no time and spared no cost in fixing it up to its original grandeur. She even had it painted her favorite shade of green, just because she could.

Soon after she began renovations, a man had stopped by from a new company in town, Hawkins Power and Light. It seemed they had gotten their hands on Edison's patents and electricity was making its way to sleepy little Hawkins much sooner than the rest of the country. This man, called himself Owens, had heard she was renovating from one of the builders she hired. He wondered if she would be willing to allow his company to install an electric light system throughout her house, as a trial, for free.

All she had to do was let them set it up, no questions asked, and answer a few surveys by telephone occasionally for the next year. Owens explained that they were government funded and they wanted three things: One, to see if it was possible. Two, to use her as an experiment to examine the total costs involved, and three, to study how the ordinary American family adapted. Joyce asked him if he knew she was a widow and that her family was anything but 'Ordinary.' The man had a kind way about him though and insisted that just meant she needed it more than anyone. He promised she wouldn't regret it.

And he was right. There was something about not having to light every goddamn candle in the house, or fuss with the gas lanterns, that she didn't think she could ever go back to what her and the boys jokingly called "the Dark Ages." Sure, she had gone a bit overboard

with all the upgrades, and money was running low now, but she didn't regret anything if it meant her sons were more comfortable. Everything was for them.

She drew a shaky breath and hastily wiped at her tear stained face as she neared the house, pointless as it was. She could feel the rawness in her cheeks, and there was no way she could hide that evidence from her oldest son. The best thing she could do was to put on a brave face for him as she walked through the door.

A new fire danced wildly in the hearth, struggling to stay lit. Ingredients for a stew were spread out across the counters in the kitchen, and a pot was steaming on the stove, filling the house with the smell of Will's favorite dish.

The tiniest grin touched her lips at the thought of the last time she had made it for him, only a few weeks earlier. The memory was fresh, yet so far removed from her. It already felt like a lifetime ago.

"What's in it?" Will's nose wrinkled as he looked over the lip of the pot boiling on top of the woodfired stove. Joyce tutted him away so she could stir their dinner one more time and make sure it didn't need anything else. Will settled in at the kitchen table, picking up his pencil and getting back to his sketchpad.

"Don't worry, It has everything you like," she reassured him, meeting his look of concern, though his attention was on his drawing - a wizard and a fiery dragon dueling on a rocky cliff. "Although, now that you mention it, I think it might be missing something..." she pursed her lips, tapping her chin as she thought, trying to regain his attention. "Something special. Magical, even."

That got him. Will watched with a grin as his mother searched the kitchen for her exceptional ingredient, her dainty fingers waving over spices and herbs as if casting a spell on the savories. She slowly turned her focus to her youngest son with a wicked grin.

"What are little boys made of, again?" She counted off the ingredients on her fingers, creeping toward him. "Snakes, snails..."

"Puppy dog tails?" Will perked up, but not before returning to his sketch.

She pointed at him, "Yes! In that case, you'll do just fine!" She cackled and lunged for him, but he didn't flinch. Waving her fingers around him for good measure, she added, "Double double, toil, and trouble. Fire burn and William bubbles!" The reaction she got was tepid.

"I know you're not a witch like everyone says. You can't scare me with that anymore, you know," Will rolled his eyes and went back to his drawing.

Joyce's heart dropped. He was growing up so fast... but not if she had anything to do with it!

She grabbed the leftover carrots and stuck them between her fingers as if they were long, crooked old hag's fingers instead. Ever so quietly, she snuck up behind her son and gently ran the roots across his cheek, letting out a sinister cackle when he jumped out of his seat. He fell into a fit of giggles when he realized what she had done.

Joyce reached for him with her other hand, through her own laughter, finding the ticklish spot between his ribs that made him laugh and squirm and shriek in delight.

He jumped back from her wiggling fingers, his face lighting up with laughter, "Mom... you're home."

"What do you mean, baby?" she asked him, her cheeks aching from smiling so hard. She turned away from Will and back to the stew bubbling away on the stove behind her.

"You're home," Jonathan repeated when she didn't respond. He touched her arm, stirring her from her daydream, pulling her back into her waking nightmare. His eyes met hers, and that's when she noticed the deep frown lines etched upon his face. It made him look so much older than his sixteen years, and that made her heart break even more. He was far too young to be this haggard with worry.

She touched her son's cheek and pulled him into a hug, and throwing herself into it, letting him hold her up for a moment.

"What did the police chief say?" Jonathan's voice hitched, the worry seeping through.

Joyce pulled back and allowed herself to collapse into the chair at the kitchen table before answering him, loosening her bodice to allow herself more air. She was beginning to feel faint again. "Chief Hopper took the case, and he's gathering volunteers to form a search party. He sent me home to rest... for now. I have to go back to the printer's by half-past three to pick up the posters with Will's information," her voice wobbled with emotion when she spoke. She was trying her best to hold it together. "Did you see your great aunt in the city?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Her eldest frowned, "Only for a moment. She hadn't seen Will... but she wasn't really making much sense either."

Joyce nodded sullenly, she knew Aunt Darlene would be difficult to get a straight answer from. "And your father's sister?"

"She moved to Chicago last spring," Jonathan place his hand on her shoulder, knowing this wasn't the news his mother wanted to hear. "Her landlord gave me her card, but the operator said no one was answering when I tried to call on her."

Joyce drew a deep breath and covered her face in her hands. Will was missing, and they had nothing to go on. Was this all really happening?

Jonathan rubbed her back, "You're shaking. I'm going to draw you a bath, and then I'm going out to join the search party. Don't worry about the posters, I'll get them." He began rummaging through her coin purse, grabbing what he hoped was enough and pocketing it, not even wanting to worry her about counting it out right now; she didn't need the added stress of worrying about the money, or the lack thereof. He knew the accommodations she had made for him and his brother had cost more than she let on and she was struggling to keep up with household expenses again. His poor mother could never seem to catch a break.

Jonathan turned back to the meal he had cooked up for her, "Will you please eat something?" Scolding her over his shoulder, he served up a bowl of stew. "I know you haven't since I left yesterday." He placed it in front of her, an expectant look on his face.

She sighed, there was no way she could possibly eat right now, her appetite was just as missing as her son was. Jonathan looked sternly at his mother, and she could tell he wasn't going to take no for an answer. Where did he get that stubbornness from?

She smiled meekly at him and took the spoon, pushing the steaming stew around the bowl and blowing on it.

Jonathan nodded at the sight of this, taking that as good enough sign she would eat if he left her alone for a few moments while he prepared the bath for her. Leaning down, he kissed her on the forehead and left her to her meal.

She continued pushing the stew around the bowl as it cooled and listened to the noises of the pump squeaking and the water hitting the hammered tin of the bathtub. The rushing sounds from the other room were soothing; another familiar background noise. Something to remind her of how things used to be, not so long ago. She sighed once more and slowly brought a spoonful of stew to her lips. Hungrier than she realized, Joyce polished off the entire bowl before Jonathan had returned for the hot water bubbling over the fire.

He filled the bucket with the hot water and carried it off to the next room repeating this task several times while Joyce cleaned up the mess her son had made while making her dinner.

The sun had shifted, and everything was suddenly cast in shadows. Joyce turned on a light in the kitchen and began to wander the old home; it felt even more empty now than ever before. Down the hall, she stopped at the portrait of her two boys, wrapped up in gold foil framing and convex glass, the fanciest frame she could get for her only picture of her sons together. Without a thought, Joyce grabbed it off the wall and marched it to the parlor where the sun still shone through the windows in the mid-afternoon sun. She examined the grey image, the sight of Will calming her somewhat. Her boys were so handsome. They looked like little princes in the photograph, dressed in their Sunday finest.

It was a blessing she was able to afford such luxuries. She had heard of families only being able to afford the photography after a person had died as a *memento mori*, and she was thankful that was not her

case. Heaven forbid they couldn't find the body... her tears dripped on the glass as she banished the thought from her mind.

Jonathan came back to let her know, "The bath should be ready for you now. I'll be home later tonight, I promise. Try to get some sleep?" He squeezed her shoulders to say goodbye, and she nodded, putting the picture up against the piano, following her orders once more. Bath. Then sleep. It was all she could do right now so why bother fighting.

It was just what she needed, after all, it seemed. She hadn't realized how tense she was until she dipped below the surface of the hot water and her muscles began to relax. She let herself sink to the bottom of the tub, the water coming up over her head. When she finally came up for air, she was renewed, the water soothing her anxious mind. She combed her hair out and lathered up in the special French lavender soap Will gave her for her birthday (he saved up all his allowance for months just to buy it for her.) Her eyes became heavy as she rinsed off, so she leaned back against the tub, drifting off in the warmth that enveloped her.

She didn't know how much time had passed when she opened her eyes again. The water was cold, and the sun was low in the sky, casting the house into shadows. She must have fallen asleep.

The house shifted and creaked, and she heard the piano tinkle, catching her attention. A loud thump came through the walls, startling her. Was someone in the house? Joyce stepped out of the bath, quickly getting dressed, the fabric of her nightgown clinging to her wet skin. She didn't bother to tie up her robe. "Hello? Who's there?" she poked her head around the corner and listened.

No one.

She tip-toed her way to the kitchen and then to the front of the house. "Hello?" she asked one more time, just to be sure. She was met with silence.

Joyce collapsed into the chaise behind her in relief. She spent a long moment there listening to the fire crackle and the wind beginning to pick up outside. She listened to her quiet house, with her true fears

finally realized: a mother missing her child. She wouldn't wish this on her worst enemy. When she couldn't stand the silence anymore, she grabbed the pack of cigarettes she kept hidden in rolltop for special occasions. She lit one, the tobacco sweet on her tongue.

The memory of her first taste of nicotine came rushing back. She was thirteen. Hop - though she called him Jim back then - had stolen a pouch of tobacco and papers from his brother one hot summer night. She was curious; He wanted her to try. It was her first cigarette, and her first kiss as they watched his friends shooting off fireworks down by the riverside that fourth of July. She drifted in the fleeting memory and inhaled deeply, meditating on the smoke.

The last beams of sunlight hit the cloud on her exhale, turning the parlor into a hazy dream. She was finally starting to relax, just a little, and she sank back into the cushions. Words couldn't express how relieved Joyce was that Hopper didn't hold a grudge with her. Or if he did, it would seem he was putting it aside for Will's sake now. She would be eternally grateful for the kindness of an old friend, and the relief he brought her, knowing she wouldn't have to face this on her own.

A loud crash interrupted her reverie, and she looked over to see the picture of her boys on its face across the room, glass shattered around the pretty frame. Joyce frowned, it didn't feel drafty in the house. That glass shouldn't have smashed so violently unless...

A chill came over her. She listened, but there was silence. Nothing but her heart beating and the fire dying.

She was alone.

Daylight was quickly retreating, and the fire had burnt down to embers. Joyce wondered how it got dark so fast as she scrambled put a new log on and stoke the flames back to life. She moved about the house, turning on every light she could on the first floor, unable to shake the feeling of unease that had befallen her. The incandescent bulbs struggled under the load, but the dim light was enough that she could begin cleaning up the glass.

When she was satisfied she had gotten all the shards, she took the guilt

frame and placed it on the open roll top desk, turning the lamp on to see it better and examine it for any damage. The bulb sparked and sputtered as it slowly filled the picture with its orange glow. She moved the image close to the light and gazed at her boy.

"Oh Will, I'm so sorry." She sniffed softly, "I wish I knew where to find you. I just want to know you're alright."

The light sputtered again and dimmed. Joyce tapped the bulb, and it quickly righted itself.

Piano music filled the room, the hammer and strings echoing through the house. Joyce snapped her head around to look at the Upright, and watched in horror as the keys moved on their own in a familiar tune. Slowly it came to her; it was the opening chords of a song that Will learned to play just a few months ago, the one that Jonathan taught him. Through her tears, she murmured to the nothingness. "Will?"

This time, there was no mistaking it. The light blinked in response to her words.

Joyce pulled the glass close to her face. "Will? Is that you? Can you... hear me?" She felt crazy for even thinking it, let alone whispering to a lamp.

The light blinked again, and she recoiled in fright. The hair on the back of her neck stood up as if all the air in the room had been sucked out. She took a breath to steady herself for what she was going to ask next.

"Will, if that's you, put the light out one more time. Can... can you do that for me, sweetheart?"

Nothing.

And then slowly, deliberately, the light went out, casting the room in shadows before flicking on again in a burst of light.

She jerked back, shocked by the clear response.

"Will! Will, oh my baby, where are you? Can you tell me where you are?"

Joyce realized the absurdity of what she was doing; the light couldn't talk back to her. But she was desperate.

"Dim the light once for yes, twice for no, do you understand?" she asked the empty room.

The light dimmed. Yes.

Joyce sucked in a breath and then thought of her next question, "Are you okay? I need to know... honey, I need to know if you're alive. Are you..?"

Before she could finish her sentence, the light darkened again. Yes.

A sigh of relief, "Okay. Okay, that's good! Good... where are you, now? Are you nearby the house?"

Yes.

Her pulse quickened and she felt compelled to ask her next question, "Are you alone?"

The light dimmed and quickly flickered back to life, only to go out once more. No.

Her heart caught in her throat. "Are you scared?"

One more flicker. Yes.

The tears sprang back fresh in her eyes at the answer. She had never felt more helpless in her life. How could she comfort and protect her frightened child when she couldn't even see him? Panic started to seep in. Still, if this was really happening, and he could hear her, she kept her voice as steady as she could.

"What should I do? How can I get to you, honey? Tell me, what do I do?"

The light came back on and stayed on now. Will couldn't answer her like this. She realized she would need something more substantial to communicate if she wanted any real answers. An image flashed in her mind; something she'd seen in a recent issue of Harper's Bazaar. A

fanciful article about a group of spiritualists in upstate New York and how they communicated with the Beyond on a wooden board. She told the lamp, "Wait, I have an idea! Don't go anywhere."

Joyce tore through the house looking for anything she could possibly use. The builders had left some paint behind in the porch, so she grabbed a bucket and a brush. Sparing the green, she went for the leftover trim color, a dark indigo, instead. She also grabbed another lamp from the hall on her way back to the parlor.

Spreading her tools on the ground in front of her, she took a step back to figure out how it would work. First, the furniture was pushed against the walls, clearing out space in the center of the room. She rolled up her grandmother's rug to one corner of the room, leaving the floor bare. She dipped the brush and went to work, painting her vision across the hardwood floors. Moving quickly, she was out of breath and almost ready for another bath when she finished the job. Joyce stood up on the loveseat to examine her work.

The alphabet ran across the floor in two lines facing her, forming an arc around the center of the room. That was where the words YES and NO were painted. Her brushstrokes were rough, but it was all still legible. Now she just had to add the finishing touches.

She stepped down to grab the two lamps off the roll top desk, putting one down next to each word. That should work nicely, she thought. But what to do for the letters?

Then it came to her. Will's favorite toy as a baby; a red rubber ball. It could move across the floor easily and act as a planchette for Will to communicate through. She found it in the closet, right where she remembered.

A moment of clarity hit her when she rounded the corner back into the parlour, looking at what she had done; her perfectly fashioned front room was destroyed. Chaise and sofa were shoved up against the bookcase. The antique Queen Anne chair pushed between the wall and foyer. Her heirloom rug haphazardly leaned in a roll against the window. Blue-black footprints spotted the floor, and she realized they were hers.

Was she really doing this? Had she gone mad? There was only one way to find out, she supposed and walked back into the room.

"Will? Are you still here?" she asked.

The light under YES glowed almost instantly. Joyce was both relieved and horrified at the same time.

"Here goes nothing," she whispered to herself, before placing the ball down on the floor, right above the letters. Climbing back up on the loveseat, she turned around to face her crude spirit board.

"Okay baby," she called out. "I need you to spell out your answers for me. Where are you?"

Joyce stared at the ball on the floor, willing it to work, to talk to her. She held her breath. The ball twitched and jerked and then slowly rolled down to the left to the letter R.

She couldn't believe her eyes, "Yes, yes, okay... R. Good!" Her idea was working!

The ball rolled up to the right.

I.

It began to pick up speed as it zoomed around the floor. Joyce spelled out the word as the ball landed on each letter. G. H. T. H. E. R. E.

"Right here," She frowned. What did that mean? "I don't know... Where's right here? You mean inside the house? How can I find you?"

The ball started to roll again, faster this time.

G-I-R-L.

Now Joyce was really confused.

"I don't know what that means, Will... please tell me, baby." She pleaded to the room, begging with her son to give her more information, something she could go on.

"What should I do?"

This time the ball whipped so fast, it took some of the paint with it, leaving a trail of indigo spots in its wake.

RUN.

Joyce gasped when she realized Will's message. She quickly jumped down from her perch right before the house was plunged into darkness. A growl came from beyond the shadows at the same time the fire roared in the hearth next to her, its flames spilling out to lick the walls, nearly touching her, and scorching the mantle. Something began to move out of the corner of her eye, and she turned towards it, half expecting to see Will. A featureless face, covered in the damask of the wall, reached out for her instead. Its deformed body pushed through the wall using the piano to pull itself along. A gaping mouth opening up into an otherworldly scream, mixing with her own. The terrifying sound filled the room. Every light in the house strobed violently at the same time, stunning her and she stumbled, finding herself backed up against the fire. Making a break for it, she bolted in the direction of the front door, her hand reaching for the knob blindly.

The door swung open before she could reach it and Hopper pushed through, startled by the sight of Joyce running towards him full bore. Despite the madness, he still had the proper sense to remove his hat as he crossed the threshold into the foyer, meeting her at the entrance to the parlor, grabbing her by the arms in an attempt to prevent them from colliding.

"What's wrong?" he asked, concern creasing his face. "It looked like your parlour was on fire."

"There was a dem-" she stopped herself before finishing her sentence, not really certain of what she saw anymore. She looked back. The lights were back to their normal glow, as was the fire. Whatever she saw in the wall was gone now. She recovered as best she could when she noticed Hopper was staring at the floor behind her. "I think I was talking... to Will," she murmured.

He was silent, and she wasn't sure if he had heard her. She took a

step back and repeated herself, watching him take the house in.

"What do you mean?" He finally got a good look at her, catching a glimpse of more than a gentleman would care to admit and quickly averted his eyes.

Joyce understood how insane she must look standing exposed in her parlor, save for a thin nightgown, lit up from behind like a Christmas tree. She tugged her robe closed, embarrassed, but committed to her words, "Will was talking to me with the lights."

"The lights..." that's when he started to notice all the incandescents, bare bulbs and lamps lighting the house and realized: "You have electricity."

She rolled her eyes, he was missing her point. "Yes, and Will was communicating with me... through it."

Hopper's eyes snapped to her. Her words were finally sinking in. The cloth bag he held in his hands weighed heavy, reminding him that he was holding evidence she likely wasn't ready to see. He chewed on his bottom lip, unsure of how to handle the next steps.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, prompting him to quickly make a decision.

"Let's maybe sit and have a drink." The way he said it made it sound like it wasn't merely a suggestion.

Joyce navigated them through the mess on the floor towards the kitchen and offered him a chair, before taking one herself. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear what he had to say.

"We found this," he pulled out Will's sketchpad, damp and muddied, the delicate charcoal drawings smeared. Hop placed it on the table between them while Joyce's eyes were transfixed by the book. There was no need to question her on it; she recognized the sketches instantly.

"It was found by the river, right where the other boys said they parted ways. I'm getting a crew together so we can dredge the river at first light." When she didn't seem to acknowledge his words, he

spoke gently, "Do you understand what I'm saying, Joyce?"

She dragged her eyes off the book to look Hop dead in the eye. "He must have left it there by accident..."

Hopper's heart was heavy for having to be the one to make her understand. "Please, Joyce, just listen-"

She slammed her hand down on the table to make him stop talking.

"No, you listen! He's here, Hop, I know I sound crazy. I know, but I can feel him. He was just talking to me, right here in this house!" Her voice was cracking, pleading with him to believe her. Her hands clutched desperately at his sleeves across the table in confession. "I saw... something horrible, too," she whispered. "Something evil... it came out of the wall," she pointed towards the other room.

He looked, but nothing was there, as expected.

That's when he noticed how badly she was shaking from fright, worry, and utter exhaustion. He clasped her trembling hands in his and dipped his head to look her in the eye.

"When did you sleep last?"

She crossed her arms now, brow furrowed in frustration. "No! You're not understa- I'm not tired, Hopper. I know what I saw." But did she really?

"You're exhausted, Joyce. Your mind is just playing tricks. Making you see things, hear things that aren't there. I know... after my daughter passed, I saw her. I heard her too."

Joyce pulled away and said, "My son is not dead." She instantly regretted her words when she saw his face fall, but she didn't apologize or take them back.

Hopper bowed his head and heaved a sigh, "I'm just saying you need to sleep, or you will drive yourself insane." There was no fighting this tonight.

He looked around the kitchen, at a loss for what else to say. A dusty

bottle of whiskey caught his eye, perched upon the top of the cupboard. Grabbing a glass, he poured her a drink, thought twice and poured himself one too. He considered offering her a few drops of the laudanum in his pocket as a chaser but hesitated. Joyce was strong enough to get through this without a crutch.

She was crying quietly to herself now, gingerly touching her son's sketchbook as if it might disintegrate if she picked it up. She accepted the drink from Hopper with a sniff, saying wryly, "Here's to my temperance," before knocking back the glass.

"Since when? The Joyce I knew drank like a fish and swore like a sailor on shore-leave... Behaved like one, too," he chuckled.

Her face softened at the brief reminder of simpler times. He poured another glass for her, this time filling it to the top, and they sat in silence while they finished their drinks; her taking comfort in his strong, stoic presence and him watching her like a hawk.

There was a feeling deep in his bones that said he could trust this woman, and there weren't many people he could say that about. Yet, the logical side of him reminded him that she was desperate to find her son, and incredibly sleep deprived. Delusions might have had her imagining talking to Will before he arrived at her house that night, but to her, it was real. That frightened him. She was on the precipice of something dangerous, something she couldn't come back from. He knew the feeling all too well.

Hopper lit up a cigarette and took a few puffs, passing the rest to her. She needed it more than him. He didn't bother to speak, allowing her the space to process everything.

Joyce was deep in her thoughts, and she puffed away on the cigarette. She was still shaking, but he watched the anxiety slowly fade with each sip she took. Minutes had passed in silence when she got to the heel of her whiskey. She knocked it back in one punch and took in a deep breath. He followed suit and set his glass down on the table next to hers. She looked so lost and helpless when she glanced up to ask, "What do I do now?"

"Nothing. We'll know more in the morning." Hopper gathered her up

delicately, "But right now, you're going to bed." He guided her through the hallway to the bottom of the stairs. Joyce hesitated, holding onto his sleeve like she didn't want to be left alone.

Usually, he would have leapt at the opportunity to escort a woman up to her bedchambers, even pushed for it if he were feeling bold, but that was not the man he was that night.

"Would you like me to come up with you?" he asked, his head bowing to speak to her softly, letting her know the offer was coming from a friend with decent intentions.

For a moment, it looked like she might say yes, but she shook her head and slowly made her way up the stairs. He watched her retreat down the dark hallway at the top, before he turned around to face the parlor. It was if a twister had torn through the household.

He wasn't sure if it was her demeanor, the disastrous state of the house or there, in fact, was an otherworldly presence, but something didn't feel right to him. The hairs on the back of his neck rose and fell as if the room were breathing. Hopper carefully maneuvered his way around the fresh paint and lamps on the floor, taking in the eerie sight. Had she really been speaking to Will through the lights?

"What happened?" Jonathan came through the door, making Hopper jump, though the older man recovered quickly. Hopper brought his finger to his lips and pointed upstairs, making his way closer to Joyce's eldest before speaking.

"Your mother had... an episode," Hopper spoke quietly so as not to let Joyce hear them. "She's exhausted. I've sent her to bed."

"Is she alright?" Jonathan's eyes widened at the sight of the parlor beyond Hopper.

"I... don't know yet." That was all Hopper could say. It was the truth.

"Where did you find this?" Jonathan noticed the sketchbook, his face drained of color. "Did you find him?"

Hopper shook his head, and gently put the pad back into its evidence bag. "No, but it's evidence. We found it by the river this evening.

We'll have a search team out there come daybreak." He made his way to the door, grabbing his hat.

"Good, I'll go with you," Jonathan started after him, hot on Hopper's heels. "I can help."

He turned back, grabbing him roughly by shoulders. "No, you can help by staying with your mother. Make sure she sleeps. Take care of her for chrissakes, you're all she has right now." Landing a solid punch in the shoulder to punctuate his words, he added, "Let the police do their job, son."

Jonathan looked like a puppy that had been kicked, but he reluctantly fell into line. Hopper didn't mean to be so rough with him, but the kid needed to understand.

With a small nod, the young man took his orders from the chief and stayed his post. He watched Hopper grab the evidence and leave on horseback into the night; their only hope to bring Will home.

3. Bell, Book & Candle

October 27, 1883

Morning came too soon. Running on little sleep, Hopper trudged his way down to the banks of the mighty Mississinewa sometime after dawn, not even 24 hours after Joyce Byers, *née* Horowitz, showed up at his door.

Police chief Hopper was on his way to meet his deputies and the small team of volunteers — a paddle tug and her crew — by the riverside at the top of the hour. According to the almanac, the sun had risen approximately an hour previous, yet it was impossible to tell. Heavy gray storm clouds churned above them, blocking out any chance of daylight, threatening to unleash a torrent of water upon the poor souls who volunteered to search for the Byers' boy that morning. Mother nature was working against them in the cruelest of ways.

Will's disappearance had shaken the townsfolk to their core and people were distraught. Nothing remarkable ever happened in sleepy little Hawkins; certainly not anything like this. Hopper was sure that the news breaking would incite certain townsfolk to gleefully perpetuate the rumors that Joyce had done something to be rid of her husband, magic or otherwise, and now her son too. But as it seemed to him that morning, watching the people gather around the riverbanks, most of the town understood regardless that a local child was missing and something needed to be done about it.

"Will's a good student." A lanky man with an overbearing mustache and a kind smile approached Hopper, confirming his thoughts. "I can't imagine him getting into any real trouble."

Hopper raised his brows at the other man, prompting an introduction.

"Scott Clarke. Will is one of my best pupils and when I heard... We just want to help any way we can," he gestured to the crowd across the fields near the schoolhouse.

"Jim Hopper." Hopper accepted the firm handshake, introducing

himself too. "A search party should start as soon as we get some daylight and will go until nightfall. You teach at the school?"

"Yessir. Currently all subjects as we transition to co-education. But I have a soft spot for the sciences; earth and life science in particular," Scott said proudly. "I'm hoping the headmaster will assign me specialized classes for the new year."

"Science, hm." Hopper couldn't lie, he had little interest in the way the conversation was headed and said as much. "Can't say I really cared for my studies growing up. Especially science."

"Oh," the teacher's face fell. "Sounds like you didn't have the right teacher."

"Ratliff," Hopper muttered the name, the reminder was enough to make him clench a fist at his side. Her leather strap had left scars.

"Ah yes," the younger man cast a grim smile. "I've heard the tales of old Ratliff. She's slowed down in her age. Believe it or not, she's still around; retired last year."

"I'd believe it. Probably being mummified as we speak," Hop smirked. Scott chuckled.

The wind picked up, and a frigid gust blew in over the water, causing the river to whitecap. Hopper could see Powell and Callahan and a few auxiliary officers from the next town over standing down by the riverboat now, so he started making his way over to them. The other man followed, keeping up the idle chit chat, talking about the weather. Hop didn't mind too much; it was a slice of normality in an otherwise bleak forecast.

A brief silence fell upon them as they walked, watching the scene unfold before them. The river was angry that morning, and the crew was struggling to get the net set up as the boat was tossed into the rocks over and over. Several police officers were scrambling to reinforce the ropes before they lost control of her. By the looks of things, it was going to be a long day.

Hopper heaved a sigh and turned to Mr. Clarke, "Y'know, my

daughter would like you... Fascinated by science. Especially the stars and the moon, faraway planets and galaxies. All those thing we can't see." He didn't have a clue why he was opening up like this to a complete stranger, but it felt cathartic, so he did. "I never really had time for that stuff. There was always too much going on down here for me to worry about what was going on above."

"How old is your daughter?" Scott asked in earnest. "Perhaps I'll get her in my class next year."

Hop's face clouded over at the memory-flash of a bright little girl, blonde hair, blue eyes and dimples like her mother when she smiled.

"She uh, goes to a private school, in New York." He brushed it off, hoping to end the conversation. Thankfully, Powell and Callahan met them halfway.

A flash of disappointment crossed Scott's face at Hopper's words, but the subject was dropped as the other two policemen approached. That was the teacher's cue to head back to the rest of the search party. "Nice chatting with you, Chief. I'm around if there's anything else I can do to help."

Hopper nodded and turned his attention to his men.

"Any new developments at the Byers' house last night, Chief?" Callahan asked, shivering in the cold, damp weather, despite his ridiculous get-up: rubber boots, rubber coat and a floppy fisherman's hat he must have borrowed from one of the boat crew. His round glasses were fogged up already, the air thick with humidity. Hopper wanted to tell him how ridiculous he looked and order him back into his proper uniform, but he knew the other man well enough to know there was no point in fighting it. Philip Callahan wasn't exactly the brightest star on the force.

"No, nothing new." Hopper decided to keep the previous night's events to himself... for now. He still wasn't sure if something evil had truly happened at the Byers' house last night, or if it had only been imagined.

Powell piped in, "And Mrs. Byers?"

"About one step away from falling off the edge," Hop mumbled to himself.

"She's been a few steps for a while now, hasn't she?" Callahan interjected, with a small smirk twitching at the corner of his mouth.

Hopper glowered at Callahan, and just beyond his peripheral vision, Powell shook his head at the younger man to get him to stop talking.

Hopper proceeded to give them their instructions for the day, establish a check-in time for each of them and sent them on their way. As they disbanded, he was positive he heard Callahan start to ask Powell under his breath, "The Chief and Mrs. Byers... they used to..." but Powell just walked away.

Hopper watched the crew load up the heavy fishing net, the edges weighted with rocks, and drop it over the side of the boat. A crack of thunder muffled the splash, and within seconds, the sky had opened up above them. Rain poured down, and the crowd around him huddled under shared umbrellas and the eaves of buildings, but he paid it no mind. The stormy weather was the least of his worries right now. He waved to Powell as the tug made its way down the river and once he saw them off, he made his way back to the center of town to his next stop: the library.

"Hopper!" He heard his name as he reached the top of Mainstreet, and turned to see Joyce walking towards him, Jonathan not far behind.

"Morning," he nodded in greeting. It was decidedly not a good one, so he dropped the pleasantries. "Did you sleep well?"

"As well as I could, " she replied.

She passed her umbrella to him, though useless as it was — he was soaked to the bone. Her gesture didn't go unnoticed though, and he took it from her graciously, holding it for the both of them.

"You know, I don't think I can thank you enough... for being there for me last night," she touched his arm but caught herself, lowering her voice so Jonathan couldn't hear as he approached.

Hopper didn't have time to respond to her gratitude before Jonathan

got close enough to ask, "Any news?"

The police chief paused, wondering if he should divulge the latest development, before remembering he owed it to the Byers to be open. He was conducting this investigation for them, and for Will, after all — they were his obligation now. Everything he was putting into this was over and above his call of duty.

"I don't want to alarm you with this news, but another person was reported missing last night. Barbara Holland. Just turned sixteen years old. We don't have reason to believe her disappearance is connected to Will just yet, so don't panic," he said preemptively, watching the myriad of emotions pass over Joyce's face at the news.

She looked like she might burst with questions, but she held back.

"Barbara. That's Mike's sister, Nancy Wheeler's friend." Jonathan filled in some of the blanks for his mother. He turned back to the Chief and asked, "Where was she seen last?"

"With Miss Wheeler, attending a debut party the night before last. She left early, unescorted and no one has seen her since."

"Nancy and Barbara are close. She must be worried sick," Jonathan said to no one in particular. And then to the Chief, "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

Hopper didn't want to disappoint the kid by telling him the best thing he could do to help was stay out of it, so he suggested something else instead. "Maybe check up on your friend. My officer said she was inconsolable when they interviewed her."

Jonathan offered, "I can check in with Mike too. Will's friends have been stopping by every day asking if we'd heard anything yet."

Hopper cracked his neck, relieving the tension built up. He knew full well those boys were trying their damndest to infringe on his investigation to find their friend. They were treading on dangerous territory and he didn't have time for one of them to go missing too. "Don't let them know too much," he advised Jonathan. "Last I spoke to your brother's friends, they were itching to form their own search

party, and I gave them strict orders not to. This is still official police business, and we don't need any young punks getting in the way."

Jonathan ignored the young punk comment and stepped to the edge of the path leading down to the river, looking out to the horizon where the tugboat was slowly making its way along the shore. "Is that the dredge? When will we know if they find anything?"

"Officer Powell has been instructed to check in with me in a few hours via telephone. I'll be sure to pass on any information to you as soon as possible," Hopper reassured the teen. "And Callahan will call if they get any leads on foot."

Jonathan understood, nodding. He quietly wandered further down the path to get a better look at the boat in the rain, leaving Hopper and his mother to some privacy, under the shared umbrella.

"No strange occurrences this morning?"

"Not since last night... I still don't understand what happened," Joyce said, eyes wide.

Hopper just shook his head, "I don't either."

Joyce's voice wavered, unsure. "Perhaps you were right. I just needed some sleep."

"Possible, but let's not rule anything out just yet. It's still early. But if anything strange happens again, you let me know before you do anything on your own."

Joyce just nodded, lost in thought.

Hopper caught her eye and gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "We'll get to the bottom of it," he promised.

That prompted a smile from her in kind, and she took a deep breath, ridding herself of the negative energy on her exhale. She seemed to be doing better today. The color was beginning to come back to her cheeks, and her eyes weren't nearly as dark as the night before when he found her in the middle of that mess. She was starting to look like the old Joyce he once knew.

"Something I meant to ask you last night," Hopper started, pausing to light a cigarette, not sure how to proceed with such a topic. "Your house... is electrified?"

Joyce nodded.

He asked to be sure, "They're not gas lamps?"

She shook her head, no.

"How is that possible? I've only just heard Mayor Kline is having it installed in Town Hall next month."

Joyce blanched, and she bit her lip, hesitant to say anything further. But it was only Hopper, so she relented.

"I've sworn not to disclose this, but a man from the government stopped by the house when it was under renovation and asked us to take part in an experiment or... well, he called it a trial. Said they're doing studies in the area before they offer it to the common household."

Hopper chewed on this for a moment, incredulous to what he was hearing. "They're conducting experiments in town? Why the hell didn't I know about this?"

Joyce shrugged, even though she knew the questions weren't intended for her.

Hopper puffed away on the cigarette, processing what she had just said. Then he asked, "Can you tell me more about this man?"

"I don't know... he said his name was Owens and I only remember he was helpful and had a kind way about him. Said I needed it more than anyone since it was just me and the boys. Had me sign a contract of some sort and he arranged everything else."

"Owens," Hop repeated. "Anything else you can tell me? What branch of the government did he say he was with?"

"He said the study was for a national government laboratory but the company that installed it was... what did he call it? Oh, Hawkins

Power and Light," she recalled.

Hopper handed Joyce the rest of his cigarette, and she puffed on it out of habit as he pulled out his notepad to write this information down.

"Let me know if you remember anything else about this Owens. I'm headed to the library for research. A good friend told me a story he heard last night, about a local woman who claimed her child was stolen from her a few years back." Hop didn't bother to say that his friend was also his bartender, Benny — irrelevant information as far as he was concerned.

"Stolen?" Joyce gasped, her hand flew to cover her mouth in shock. "My God, I don't remember hearing about that!"

"Me neither, though I might have been in New York when it happened." Hopper frowned.

Joyce frowned too, shuffling her weight to one foot and switching her satchel over to her other shoulder. "This research... Is it anything I can help with?"

Hopper shook his head. He needed her at home, resting as much as possible — as lucid as possible — no matter the outcome.

"I'll let you know. Stay by the telephone today. I'll have the operator relay if I hear anything more about the search."

"You don't think Will was stolen from me, do you?"

He couldn't honestly say until they had more to go on, so he fed her a white lie. "No, but it was the last known report of a missing child in the area. I just want to be sure we're searching every possible avenue."

Joyce's brows knitted together with worry. She took another drag off his cigarette before she handed it back to him, with a sheepish smile. He moved to hand her umbrella back, but she refused.

"Borrow it. I can share with Jonathan. Looks like you need it more than I do," she said, catching him off guard and reached up to gently

wipe away the raindrops on his cheek. It was a sweet, brief touch of a long lost memory shared between them. In the distance, the school bell rang in a rhythmic chime, bringing their attention back down to earth.

Before he could respond, she was off with a wave of her 'kerchief, calling after Jonathan down the path to the river.

"Police Chief Hopper, what a nice surprise. What are you doing here?" The pretty librarian asked, instantly conveying her displeasure at the sight of him.

Hopper paid it no mind, he was used to people treating him differently because of his job title around town. Especially while in uniform. "I'm here on police business, Miss. I'm going on a lead for a missing person's case."

"For Joyce Byers? Didn't her husband mysteriously pass last year?"

"That wasn't mysterious," Hopper set his jaw, and explained. "That was a heart attack. Her son is missing now. That's mysterious."

"Hm," she smirked, tapping her chin, drawing out her next words to really capture his attention. "You know, now that I think of it, she was in here earlier this morning. She checked out several dusty tomes on demons and the occult. Isn't that funny, considering her reputation as of late?"

He wondered if it was true and why Joyce hadn't said anything when she saw him. "Perhaps that information is best kept to yourself. This is a matter for the police," Hopper grumbled, reminding her not-so-subtly to mind her business.

"What can I help you with today, officer?" She blinked at him innocently.

Hopper ignored her slight. "I need the newspaper archives pulled, every copy of the Indianapolis Times, for the last ten years."

She lifted an eyebrow at his request. "The periodicals and newspapers are on the second level," she said, pointing behind him.

"Isn't it your job to go get those for me?" Hopper could feel his irritation spiking.

The librarian curled a lip at him then. "You don't remember me do you, James?" She crossed her arms, upset by his memory lapse.

"Should I?"

"We courted. For six weeks. When you moved back to town?"

Ah, there it was. Her name was Marissa, and she was absolutely correct. For a moment in time, after he moved back to Hawkins, he had tried to get his life on track. His relatives had suggested taking another wife straight away to take his mind off the tragedy. He tried and failed miserably, not in his right mind. He ended up down a dead end road, the trail along the way strewn with random women from Hawkins. He had completely forgotten about that time in his life, along with her.

"Marissa, nice to see you again," He strained, trying to recover, but by then it was a lost cause.

She reluctantly wrote out the numbers he'd need to find what he was looking for up in the stacks and sent him on his way.

"I think I'd like to visit Nancy this afternoon if that's okay with you?" Jonathan asked his mother as they made their way down Mainstreet in the rain, headed back home. Usually, he wouldn't have to ask, but he could tell she was still a bit fragile and wanted to make sure to run it by her first.

"Of course, sweetheart." Joyce patted his arm as he held the umbrella for them both. "Send my hellos and thank Mrs. Wheeler for the casserole," she said absently, her mind elsewhere.

"I will. You could come with me? Might be good to get out of the house," Jonathan suggested.

"Oh no," she waved him off. "I promised Hopper I'd stay close to the telephone in case there's news."

As she spoke, a sign caught her eye. It read in thick gold lettering:

BAUMAN'S CURIOSITIES of the DIVINE. A detailed sketch of an open hand was featured underneath, along with the words *Palm Readings, 15 cents.* To the left was a list of titles the mysterious Bauman held: Psychic, Spiritual Medium, Expert on Occultism & Other Esoterica.

Her eyes fell to the storefront. No other signs showed that this was the right place, but the little pointing hand on the bottom of the sandwich-board said otherwise. She looked up to the windows where heavy black velvet curtains lined the ornate glass. It was dark, save for a soft glow coming from the back of the store and then the chimney belched out a purple cloud of smoke — someone was inside.

Joyce strayed toward the entrance, looked up to the storm clouds above, and then back to her son. "I'd like to step in for a moment. Dry off a bit."

"Here?" Jonathan hesitated, holding her in place, looking between the sign and the front door of the unmarked building. "I don't know if that's a good-"

"I'll only be a few minutes," she patted his arm in assurance she would be all right and left him behind, making her way up the steps. "Stay here if you like."

He stood on the street, holding her umbrella, and stared after her, tapping his foot. Thinking better than to let his mother go into a strange building unescorted, he followed her with a huff as soon as she disappeared from view.

It was dusty and dark inside the little shop, with only one flickering gas lamp on at the back of the narrow room next to a small cast iron stove, a fire freshly lit in its belly. Twin columns of sunlight were the only other source of light, igniting dust particles as they floated around the room. The smell of burning sage filled the air. Eastern charms for sale covered every surface; cloth wrapped candles for spells, bundles of herbs tied tight in twine; a three-legged dead rabbit hung by its last hind leg with a sign: 'Lucky Rabbit.' Jonathan held back a snort at the morbid little play on words.

Hanging back to examine the rest of the curio, he meandered around

the front of the shop, the umbrella dripping at his side. He allowed his mother some privacy, settling to watch over her from a distance instead.

Joyce stood at the counter as a tall man with a scraggly black beard, wearing a garment somewhere between wizard's robes and a housecoat, appeared with a puff of smoke from behind a curtain. A strong whiff of stale tobacco trailed after him.

"Ah, I knew someone was here," the man smirked, stopping short of laughing at his own joke. "Welcome, welcome to Bauman's Curiosities of the Divine! I am... Murray Bauman."

Joyce smiled awkwardly at his eccentricity, unsure of how to handle all the pomp.

His smirk faded away into indifference at her lukewarm response. "How can I help you today?"

A frog had found its way into her throat suddenly, and she stammered, "I- I saw your sign outside. I was hoping to ask for some advice?"

Murray's face lit up once more. "Absolutely, my dear! Let me guess. You want an enchantment... something to bring back 'the one that got away?'" He waggled his eyebrows at her, a slimy smile plastered to his hairy face.

Joyce opened her mouth to correct him but snapped it shut when he held up a hand to interrupt her.

"No, no, that's not it." He closed his eyes, murmuring, "You wish to speak to a loved one from beyond the grave. A husband, perhaps? Some unfinished marital business?"

Joyce's face twisted at the thought of ever having to speak to Lonnie again but before she could shake her head no, the man spoke again.

"Ah no, I see now." He opened his eyes with sudden clarity and grinned. "You need me to help you find your missing son."

Joyce's mouth dropped, "How did you know?"

"Psychic," Murray pointed at himself as if it should have been obvious.

Jonathan rolled his eyes from his vantage point. The man must have heard the news around town about Will going missing and had made a lucky guess. He resisted the urge to interrupt, knowing his mother well enough to leave her alone, if only to get this silly whim out of her system.

"Right," Joyce nodded enthusiastically at the man, slipping into the ruse. "I was hoping you might use your... abilities to see where he is."

"The police have no leads I take it?"

She shook her head, choosing to keep Hopper's newest information to herself... just in case.

"Okay, then. Let's see what I can do for you... I'll need something of your son's, of course. A personal memento or something that belongs to him."

Joyce fished the cabinet card out of her satchel and placed it on the counter, with the explanation, "It's all I have of Will right now."

Murray picked it up and examined it before nodding, yes. "This will do just fine." That's when he noticed Jonathan perusing the shelves. "He's with you?"

"Yes, that's my eldest."

Jonathan stared back at the con-man and puffed his chest, trying his best to convey that he was being watched closely.

Murray nodded to him and then opened the curtain behind him. He waved her back behind the counter. "Come with me to my reading room, and I can tell you everything you need to know."

Joyce looked to Jonathan, reassuring she would be okay, and followed Murray down the hall to the back of the shop. The cramped room was filled with crystals and candles surrounding a round table. Spread out across its top sat a deck of cards, the largest bottle of vodka Joyce had ever seen and a well-used, overflowing ashtray.

Murray hastily put the extraneous items away, inviting her to sit down at his table. He placed a pillar candle in the center of the table and lit it and along with a stick of incense, "to ward off bad spirits."

"Let's see, now, give me your hands..." he settled into his seat and opened his palms to her on the table. "What may I call you to put you at ease, my dear."

"Joyce is fine," she offered her Christian name and reached across to put her tiny hands in his, and with a deep breath from Murray, they began.

"Focus on the candle, Joyce. Focus on the light and see your son... see Will, in your mind's eye. Now, close your eyes."

Joyce did as she was told.

Murray's hands were warm and steady, and he raised hers in the air with him as he invited his spirit guides to the table. She felt a sense of calm wash over her, her breathing matching his now. A tendril of frankincense found its way to her nose, and she twitched, holding back a sneeze.

That's when Murray spoke, "Hm, I feel cold — do you feel that?"

Joyce didn't, but she agreed anyway.

"It's cold where he is, and dark..."

Joyce fidgeted, expecting to hear something more substantial than cold and dark.

"I see something. Maroon corduroy, and... pewter buttons?"

"Will's rucksack," Joyce exclaimed, filling in the blanks for Murray and urging him to continue. Could he really see Will?

"Yes, and I see water. Rushing water," his voice wandered, becoming so low she had to strain to hear him. "Cold water, everywhere."

His words flipped a switch; she saw it too, although her eyes remained closed. It was a brief flash of blackness and then water

splashing. Will, shaking, pale and scared, reaching out through the damp nothingness, screaming for her. Beyond him, a quick flash of pink and a giant, leathery monster, putrid face opened like a giant star-shaped venus fly trap, its petals quivering. It looked hungry for blood. Joyce reached for Will, but he was gone in an instant. She pulled away with a yelp, frightened, and then a hand touching her shoulder, jolting her awake from the all-too-real vision, bringing her back into reality.

Jonathan pushed through the curtain into the back room, looking for the source of his mother's cry with a fist cocked back, ready to fight. "Is everything okay in here?"

Murray held his hands up in the air and stood up. "We're fine, we're okay," he said, worried that fist was meant for him. "But it seems your mother maybe... saw something?"

Murray and Jonathan turned to Joyce. She looked like she saw a ghost, nodding, reaching for Jonathan.

"I saw Will. I saw your brother."

"Mom, please..." Jonathan moved to help her up to go. He had to get her home on Hopper's orders. This side trip wasn't good for her.

"No, this is good," Murray stopped them. "We can expand on this... You might have some untapped psychic abilities yourself, Joyce. If you like, my schedule is clear this evening. I would be happy to host a proper séance at your house, around midnight tonight when the veil between our world and theirs is thinnest. Free as a courtesy to you under these dire circumstances."

"Séance?" Joyce and Jonathan echoed, sharing a look.

Murray explained, his hands gesturing wide, "What we did just now... but bigger."

Joyce nodded, hopeful for anything that would let her talk to Will or even see him.

"Great," Murray smiled as wide as a crocodile. "So we will need a table big enough to fit at least eight souls, of the living variety. The

more, the merrier, but no naysayers or staunch Catholics, please. If anyone has anything sentimental to Will, tell them to bring it. I'll be there at eleven sharp."

Joyce wrote down directions to find their home and stood up to go, "How much do I owe you?"

"It's on the house this time. Just be sure to invite everyone you know tonight."

Jonathan's eyes rolled all the way to the back of his head as he grabbed his mother to go. The man must have been new to town if he didn't know his mother was the town outcast and didn't have many friends. He was obviously trying to exploit them.

Never the wise, Joyce thanked Murray profusely for his generosity as he walked them to the door.

He smiled in parting, before saying, "One more thing, we'll need candles, lots of candles. Gather up as many as you have in the house."

Joyce frowned, "Oh, we only have a few for the lanterns now. We won't need them. Our house is wired, we have lights in every room."

"You have electricity." Murray's face froze in a placid smile.

Jonathan watched with pleasure as the other man's face fell at the realization he needed to do more homework on his marks. Especially ones that could afford electricity.

Joyce missed the look on his face, continuing, "Yes, that's how I was talking with Will."

He frowned, working through what she had said, "Your missing son... was talking through the lights. In your house."

"Yes," Joyce said, matter-of-fact.

Murray stared at her for a moment, internally debating if he needed further explanation from a possible madwoman. Instead of questioning it further, he chuckled as he saw them out, "Well, we'll still need the candles. I'll bring some from my store. Nice ones that

you can buy off me. See you tonight!"

"Please tell me you will not go through with this," Jonathan hissed at his mother as they rounded onto the street. He shook open the umbrella for her, as he struggled to keep up with her brisk pace. "He's clearly heard about what happened to Will. He's playing at your emotions."

Joyce waved him off. It was raining harder now, soaking her dress, and souring her mood. She wasn't about to let Jon's words get her down.

But he continued, headstrong, "You shouldn't have told him about the lights."

"Never mind what I should or shouldn't have told him. We need all the help we can get Jonathan," she looked to her son, casting shame. How could he even question something like this? That strange man just helped her see Will. "This is for your brother," she reminded him.

"I'm sorry for being concerned some weirdo is trying to take advantage of my mother," Jonathan's voice dripped with sarcasm. "It's all irrational nonsense, you know. Will is missing, and this is what you're fixating on?"

She ignored him and marched on, not caring if she got wet anymore. "Will is not missing — he's just stuck somewhere else with that... that thing! I can feel your brother, Jonathan," she pleaded. "He's still there, I know it. Just let me try to speak to him again, and you'll see for yourself."

Jonathan stopped walking and threw his arms up in the air in exasperation. "Speak to him through the lights? And there's a demon in the wall! Are you even hearing yourself?"

Joyce stopped in her tracks and spun on a dime to face her eldest, wincing with the torment he was causing her. "I know what it sounds like, Jonathan. I know I sound like a lunatic, but I swear I talked to him. Will is calling out for me! And he's out there, and he's alone, and he's scared, and I... I don't care if anyone believes me! I am not gonna stop looking for him until I find him and bring him home." She

punctuated her words by poking at him.

"Think logically, please! Will is missing!" Jonathan shouted over her, frustrated by her outburst. His own outburst drawing the attention of a few people across the street who stopped to stare. "You don't know where he is. For all you know, he might even be - "

"Don't finish that thought," Joyce held a hand up to him. "Please, just stop."

"Fine," Jonathan grunted, giving in. He couldn't be bothered to keep her grounded right now. "I'm sure you know the way home from here, so if you'll excuse me." He released her arm and passed her the umbrella, stomping through the puddles on the path back to town.

"Where are you going?" Joyce called out to him through sheets of rain.

He shouted his parting words over his shoulder at her, not bothering to look back as he echoed her words back to her. "I'm joining the search party... to bring Will home!"

Hopper was pushing hour seven of his research in the library. Eyes bleary, he skimmed another page of the Times, searching for a shred of news he could connect to Will's disappearance. He was well into the archives from 1873 and was losing hope he would find anything remotely close to what Benny the barkeep had mentioned to him the night previous.

That's when his eyes fell on it. A small little blurb, tucked away in the corner, near the classifieds.

The headline read in bold, **Local Woman Claims Government Conspiracy**, and the by-line underneath: *'Unwed mother states: "They took my daughter."'*

Hopper's heart missed a beat at the words. Government conspiracy. The same government that installed the electric light system at the Byers residence? Was he pulling at strings or was there something to that? He kept reading:

BLOOMINGTON, IN - US Government appointed Scientist Dr. Martin

Brenner has been accused by local woman Teresa Ives of several cases of abuse, including horrific allegations of medical malpractice, child endangerment, and kidnapping. The unwed young mother, Miss Ives, claims her newborn daughter was taken from her late last year by Dr. Brenner and his staff at the Hawkins National Laboratories. She has been quoted as saying the doctor planned to use her baby girl in "experiments to test the boundaries of the human body and mind." Local authorities are currently investigating the matter. Neither Dr. Brenner, nor the Laboratory in Hawkins, could be reached for comment at the time of publication.

He read it once more, letting the words sink in. Hawkins National Laboratories? There was no laboratory in or around Hawkins that Hopper was aware of. He wondered if these experiments had any connection to the one Joyce was participating in. His head felt as if it were in a vice now, pounding away at the back of his skull. The article was exactly what he was looking for, and while it was something to go on, it only gave him more questions than answers at this point.

He brought the newspaper back up to the main desk. Marissa was still there, stamping books in a pile. He approached her cautiously this time, waiting until she saw him to ask, "Have you seen anything more about this news report, here?"

She held her spectacles up to her eyes to read it and then looked at him skeptically. "First time I've heard about it."

"So you haven't come across this in the newspaper archive before?" When he didn't get a response from her, he added, "Aren't you supposed to know everything in this place?"

Marissa scoffed at his remark, offended.

Hopper didn't notice his misstep as he continued, trying to reason with her, "Look, if you pull the periodicals from October 1872 to 75, I'll go through the Chicago Tribune archives..."

The librarian shot him a final, icy look, before walking into the back room, leaving him alone standing at the desk by himself. With a grunt, he looked up to the clock. Nearly 4pm; he'd have to check in with his men and Joyce in an hour. He had just enough time to pull a

few more papers from the archive, but at least the day wasn't a complete loss. If he couldn't find anything more, the next step would be to track this Miss Teresa Ives down and speak with her.

Reaching over the desk, Hopper kept an eye on the closed door where Marissa disappeared into, and stole a pad of paper, a pencil and a hefty pair of scissors and headed back up to the stacks. There was no rest for the weary and no peace for the wicked. He reminded himself that he could sleep when he was dead.